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**Predicting the job satisfaction of female sex workers in Queensland, Australia.**

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**ABSTRACT.** This study used a cross-sectional survey to examine job satisfaction and its correlates among 247 female sex workers working as private service providers, in licensed brothels and in illegal sectors of the industry (mainly street-based workers). Overall, most sex workers reported positive job satisfaction. Satisfaction was higher in women working legally and was generally comparable with women from the general population. Multivariate analyses revealed that job satisfaction was significantly linked to women's reasons for initially entering the industry. Sex workers' age, education, marital status, length of time in the industry and current working conditions were apparently less important for satisfaction.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although numerous studies have compared and ranked various occupations in terms of job satisfaction, understandably, little such research has occurred in jobs that are part of the informal, 'grey' economy, including, for example, sex work and other unregulated domestic and service industries (Taylor, 2004). Indeed, little is known about the job satisfaction of sex workers, or how specific work experiences and conditions contribute to the satisfaction. Of course, sex workers are a heterogeneous group, and their experiences may vary before, and subsequent to, entering the sex industry. Therefore, job satisfaction is likely associated with a number of factors, including the personal characteristics of the workers, their reasons for entering the industry, and the characteristics of their workplaces.

Research has examined the personal characteristics, especially the physical and mental health, of sex workers in various populations. However, few studies have linked health status with job satisfaction. Overall, the literature on the health of sex workers is inconsistent and often reflects differences in sampling procedures and other methodological considerations. While some studies have found significant levels of pain, discomfort, fatigue and psychological distress among sex workers (Wong, Holroyd, Gray, & Ling, 2006) others have reported levels of psychological distress and physical health profiles similar to women in the general population (Boyle, Dunne et al., 1997; Romans, Potter, Martin, & Herbison, 2001).

Job satisfaction might also be associated with the reasons workers enter the sex industry. Indeed, a Dutch study found negative attitudes to work (and depersonalisation) were more commonly reported by sex workers who were not working by personal choice (Vanwesenbeeck, 2005). When sex work is embedded within a context of disadvantage such as a history of interpersonal violence, leaving home early or poverty (Behets et al., 2001; Boyle, Dunne et al., 1997; Brannigan & Van Brunschot, 1997; Potterat, Rothenburg, Muth,

Darrow, & Phillips-Plummer, 1998; Seib, Fischer, & Najman, 2009; Surratt, Inciardi, Kurtz, & Kiley, 2004), workers probably enter the sex industry because they lack other options, and may, therefore, report low levels of work satisfaction.

Job satisfaction might also be influenced more specifically by the characteristics of the workplace. Studies have suggested that a negative attitude towards work is associated with a lack of control over client interactions (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004; Perkins, Prestage, Sharp, & Lovejoy, 1994); encountering negative social reactions (Dalla, 2000; El-bassel, Schilling, Irwin, & Faruque, 1997; Vanwesenbeeck, de Graaf, Van Zessen, Straver, & Visser, 1995); the emotional labour of particular types of service provision (Harcourt & Donovan, 2005; Lever & Dolnick, 2000; Sanders, 2004); and exposure to negative work experiences such as physical threats, coercion and workplace violence (Church, Henderson, Barnard, & Hart, 2001; El-bassel & Witte, 2001).

Lastly, the physical demands of sex work, coupled with a lack of appropriate ergonomic equipment, may affect workers' health. For example, sex workers report a range of physical complaints including back and knee pain, and repetitive strain injuries in the wrists, hands and shoulders (Alexander, 1998; Scarlet Alliance & AFAO, 2000).

Taken together, the existing research suggests that the job satisfaction of sex workers is affected by a variety of factors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine factors that may influence the job satisfaction of female sex workers. Specifically: (i) health status; (ii) background work factors; and (iii) workplace experiences.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

Prior to 1992, all types of sex work were illegal in Queensland, Australia. In 1992, state laws were passed to legalise private sole operators (private sex workers). Likewise, in 1999,

regulated brothel-based sex work was legalised. All other industry sectors, including street-based sex work and escort agencies, remain illegal. In 2003, data were collected from 247 female sex workers in Queensland, Australia through a structured questionnaire. The participants (aged 18–57 years) included private sex workers (n = 103), licensed brothel workers (n = 102) and a smaller number of women working illegally (n = 42). The majority of illegal sex workers in the sample were street-based (33/42).

### **Procedure**

Multiple recruitment strategies were used to obtain a diverse sample of sex workers. Sex workers were approached directly whilst working in licensed brothels and on the streets, with a response rate of more than 90%. Private sex workers were contacted through their advertisements in newspapers (a response rate of about 6%). Telephoning sex workers directly was not successful as women were often suspicious of the researcher's legitimacy or intentions. Sex workers listed on an adult escort website were also emailed about participating in the study. This strategy was somewhat more successful than contacting women by phone (a response rate of 24%). The remainder of the women were referred by other sex workers or other agencies. The recruitment strategies used in this study are detailed elsewhere.

Data were collected through both face-to-face interviews and self-completion of a questionnaire, depending on the location of the interview and the preference of the participant. For example, where privacy was limited, sex workers often chose to self-complete the survey in the presence of the interviewer. Data on several key variables and the trends in missing data were examined to determine if data varied by mode of administration. As no differences were found, the data were pooled. Ethical approval was obtained from University Ethics Committees before starting data collection.

## Measures

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data on a range of topics. The instrument included 333 items about socio-demographic information, experiences of violence, work history and workplace characteristics, health status and job satisfaction.

Standard questions used in the Australian census collected socio-demographic characteristics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995) while information about work history (including age of commencement, length of time in the sex industry and income) and characteristics of the workplace, such as type and location of service provision, were derived from a questionnaire used to collect data from Queensland sex workers in 1991 (Boyle, Glennon et al., 1997). Data about violence, both inside and outside sex work, were obtained by several items (Boyle, Glennon et al., 1997; Fleming 1997; Koss & Oros, 1982). The survey included items on unwanted sexual experiences before 16 that were initially developed by Wyatt (1985) and subsequently modified by Fleming (1997). Measurement of unwanted sexual experiences since age 16 was collected in two ways. First, using an instrument on sexual experiences developed by Koss and Oros (1982) which reported high internal consistency for all items (Cronbach alpha 0.74) (Koss & Oros, 1985). The instrument included questions about sexual intercourse because of threatened or actual violence, because of feeling overwhelmed by argument or pressure, or because someone used their position of authority (Koss & Oros, 1985). Second, sexual and physical violence was examined using questions on the frequency of rape or bashing by a client, partner, police or others in the sex industry from an earlier survey of sex workers (Boyle, Glennon et al., 1997). For the purpose of data analysis, the unwanted sexual experiences variable was collapsed into a dichotomous form to indicate having been raped or bashed by a client in the past 12 months. Finally, quality of life was measured using the Short-Form 36 (Ware and Sherbourne, 1992).



The dependent variable in this study was job satisfaction, which was measured through five, four-point Likert items that measured participants' attitudes towards their current work situations. Participants were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with following items: (i) My daily work is always varied and interesting; (ii) In general, my job has lived up to my expectations; (iii) My work is a major source of satisfaction in my life; (iv) The future holds good prospects for people in jobs like mine; and (v) If I had to do it over again, I would definitely chose a job like the one I have now. The Cronbach alpha for the five items is 0.79, suggesting that the items have high internal consistency. These items also had high-level construct validity in previous research in other occupational groups (Baxter, Lynch-Blosse, & Western, 1996). The scores for the five items were summed and standardised to a 100-point scale, with 100 being the best possible score (Baxter et al., 1996). The scores were then used to determine the extent to which sex workers were satisfied or dissatisfied with their work.

The main independent variable considered in this study was the current work sector. Participants were asked to indicate their current engagement in a variety of industry sectors including massage parlour, legal brothel, illegal brothel, escort agency, private work, bar or hotel, street/beat, and other types of sex work. This variable was collapsed into three categories: legal (licensed) brothels; private sex workers, and; illegal (predominantly street-based) sex workers. The study also examined several co-variates of job satisfaction and psychological distress, as identified in the literature. These variables included knowledge of involvement in the sex industry by the workers' families (Castaneda, Ortiz, Allen, Garcia, & Hernandez-Avila, 1996); clients offering financial incentives to have sex without a condom (Perkins & Lovejoy, 1996); and mental health (Chudakov, Ilan, Belmaker, & Cwikel, 2002). We also considered several other work-related factors in the analysis, including being

assaulted by a client (Ward, Day, & Weber, 1999), recent income (in the past seven days), and the proportion of income obtained from sex work.

### **Data analysis**

All analyses were performed with SPSS version 12.0 statistical package (SPSS, 2001).

Descriptive data are expressed as percentages, mean (SD) or mean (95% CI). Bivariate associations were analysed using  $\chi^2$  tests, t tests and one-way ANOVA. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to calculate linear relationships between normally distributed continuous variables. The level for significance was set at  $\alpha = .05$ .

Significant bivariate associations were included in the stepwise linear regression. The model was built to assess the relative impact of mental health, background work factors and recent work experiences on job satisfaction. The background work factors examined were: (i) reasons for entering the sex industry; (ii) age when started sex work; and (iii) family awareness of working in the sex industry. Recent work experiences examined were (i) recently having been raped or assaulted by a client; (ii) having been charged with a prostitution offence; (iii) being offered extra money for unprotected sex; and (iv) current work sector. Interactions between independent variables were also explored, but none were found to be statistically significant.

### **RESULTS**

The demographic characteristics, health status and work-related variables of the women sampled were grouped according to current work sector (Table 1). Overall, three-quarters of the sample (77.6%) were born in either Australia or New Zealand. Private sex workers were generally older ( $M = 35.2$ ,  $SD = 8.3$  years) than women working in licensed brothels ( $M = 29.7$ ,  $SD = 6.8$  years) and illegally ( $M = 30.4$ ,  $SD = 8.7$  years). Private and brothel-based sex

workers were most likely to have completed additional study since leaving school. About one in four women in these two legal sectors had completed a bachelor degree or higher, compared with only 7.1% of women from the illegal (predominantly street-based) sectors of the sex industry. There were some differences in the marital status of the sample. Around two-thirds (66.7%) of illegal sex workers reported being single, compared with half (49.0%) of licensed brothel workers and 39.8% of private sex workers. There were no significant differences in the self-reported physical health of women in the three sectors, although illegal sex workers reported worse mental health than did women from other industry sectors (Table 1).

Illegal sex workers tended to enter the industry at a younger age than women working privately or in licensed brothels (Table 1). Some notable differences were found between women from the three industry sectors in terms of the reasons given for entering the sex industry: illegal sex workers were more likely to report starting sex work to pay for their drug habit, while private and brothel-based sex workers were more likely to enter the sex industry because of the earning potential and flexible hours. With regard to family members' awareness of the occupation of the participants, the women working in licensed brothels were significantly less likely to have informed their family about their current occupation.

A couple of variables related to income were examined. Sex workers' incomes in the past seven days were grouped into quintiles, according to the average weekly income for 2004–2005 as determined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007): first (lowest) quintile =  $\leq$  \$218; second quintile = \$219–\$384; third quintile = \$385–\$537; fourth quintile = \$538–\$708; fifth quintile =  $\geq$  \$709. When comparing this variable by industry sector, there were no significant differences. However, private sole operators reported that they obtained a greater proportion of their income from sex work, compared with brothel-based and illegal sex workers (Table 1).

The analysis also examined workplace experiences. Again, differences were recorded between industry sectors. Specifically, illegal (street-based) sex workers were significantly more likely to have been charged with a prostitution offence, to have been recently raped or assaulted by a client, and to have been offered extra money for unprotected sex by clients (Table 1).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Sex workers were also asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the five statements about their job satisfaction. Over three-quarters (81.4%, n = 201) of the women *agreed* or *strongly agreed* their job was varied and interesting, and that their job had lived up to their expectations (78.0%, n = 192). However, the women were less likely to report that ‘work is a major source of satisfaction in my life’, with only 44.2% (n = 109) of the sample *strongly agreeing* or *agreeing* with this statement. With respect to career prospects, over half of the women (60.8%, n = 149) *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that ‘the future holds good prospects for people doing work like mine’. And almost two-thirds (63.4%, n = 156) of the women either *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that they would choose a similar job if they had to ‘do it over again’.

The mean job satisfaction score for private sex workers was 64.3 (95% CI 60.0–68.6), compared with 60.6 (95% CI 56.7–64.5) for brothel workers, and 48.2 (95% CI 41.9–54.6) for those working illegally. The job satisfaction scores of our women did not appear significantly different from those of a population-based sample of 412 Australian women (Baxter et al., 1996) working either full- or part-time (mean difference = -1.6; 95% CI -4.3 to 1.1;  $p = .25$ ). On further examination, however, there were some interesting differences between our sample and the stratified sample of Australian women. These authors grouped

their sample by labour market position, distinguishing between primary and secondary sectors on required postsecondary qualifications, job training, and the opportunity to design aspects of work, in conjunction with employment constraints (i.e. women's ability to work overtime, to move to a new area or to spend time with work colleagues outside work hours). Participants in their study were allocated to the primary labour market sector if they had the ability to design aspects of their job and if post-secondary qualifications were required. Many women in this group also experienced a low level of constraints, which was reflected in fewer limitations associated with the characteristics of an occupation. When compared to these stratified samples, private and brothel-based sex workers reported better mean job satisfaction than the women in Baxter et al.'s secondary market sector with either high ( $M = 53.4$ ) or low ( $M = 56.2$ ) constraints. However, these two groups of sex workers reported comparable job satisfaction with women in the primary market sector with high ( $M = 66.1$ ) and low constraints ( $M = 65.8$ ).

In terms of the bivariate correlates of job satisfaction, no demographic factors were significantly associated with job satisfaction in the sample (data not shown). However, job satisfaction was negatively correlated with age on entering the sex industry, with women who entered the industry before 18 years of age reporting the lowest satisfaction (Table 2). Job satisfaction was also associated with the reasons women entered the sex industry; women who gave the reason for entering the sex industry as 'sex work provides good money with flexible hours' reported higher satisfaction than other women; while women who entered the industry for 'survival' or to pay for their drug habits reported lower satisfaction (Table 2). Also, women who disclosed the nature of their work to family members had higher job satisfaction than those who did not disclose. However, income was not associated with job satisfaction, as neither the proportion of income obtained through sex work nor income quintiles (in the past seven days) were statistically significant. Overall, illegal sex workers

were more dissatisfied than private and licensed brothel workers. Similarly, those who had been charged with prostitution offences, those who reported being recently been raped or assaulted by clients and those whose clients frequently requested unprotected sex reported decreased job satisfaction (Table 2).

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The results of the stepwise linear regression (beta coefficients and standard errors) provided information on the relative impact on job satisfaction of a number of independent variables (Table 3). Current mental health status, entering the sex industry because it provided good money and flexible hours, and family members' awareness of participants' current occupations were positively associated with job satisfaction. In contrast, entering the sex industry because of a pre-existing drug habit was negatively associated with satisfaction. The variables related to work experiences did not remain significant when the analysis controlled for other factors (Table 3). Overall, this model explained 25% of the variation in job satisfaction.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored some correlates of job satisfaction among female sex workers from Queensland, Australia. Initial analysis of bivariate associations suggested that industry sectors were strongly predictive of job satisfaction. Specifically, illegal (predominantly street-based) sex workers were significantly less satisfied than women from other sectors of the sex industry (private and licensed brothel workers). This group was also more likely than sex workers in legal contexts to report negative experiences both inside and outside their working

environment. However, within the context of the subsequent multivariate analysis, many of the variables examined to possibly explain differences in job satisfaction, including the industry sector, proved non-significant. Only three of the variables appeared to strongly influence job satisfaction: (i) the current mental health status of the workers; (ii) the reasons for entering the industry; and (iii) whether the workers' families knew of their involvement in the industry.

For the sex workers in this study, it appears that factors associated with the decision to become a sex worker (e.g. whether entering the sex industry to support a drug habit or for a lucrative income) determined job satisfaction, rather than the sector of industry in which they work. However, it may be that the reason for entering the industry may itself determine the type of work undertaken. For example, street-based sex workers may enter the sex industry with more limited options, and this may determine the type of sex work they do, their perceptions of their work, and their control and influence over their workplace.

This study indicated that sex workers whose family members knew of their involvement in the industry reported higher job satisfaction than those women whose families were unaware of their sex work. Intentional disclosure to family might reflect a positive occupational identity. Alternatively, for those who have not disclosed, managing the risk of discovery and maintaining a secret and separate identity may be an important concern that reduces job satisfaction and increases stress levels (Castaneda et al., 1996; Sanders, 2004; Scambler & Scambler, 1997; Whittaker & Hart, 1996). Workers whose families are aware of their occupational choice may also have greater access to social support than would otherwise be the case. Studies of other occupational groups suggest that social support is a strong predictor of job satisfaction and reduces the likelihood of burnout (Bond, Punnett, Pyle, Cazeca, & Cooperman, 2004; Randolph, Doisy, & Doisy, 2005; Vanwesenbeeck, 2005).

The status of sex workers' mental health was associated with job satisfaction. This finding is consistent with those in other occupational groups, in which psychological distress is either a precursor, or a consequence of, inadequately managing emotional labour and workplace demands (Bond et al., 2004; Boyd, 2002; Lindblom, Linton, Fedeli, & Bryngelsson, 2006). Sex as a commercial activity can involve extensive emotional labour; sex workers often need to maintain emotional distance from their clients, yet are required to project an interested and affectionate persona (Brewis & Linstead, 2000).

This study was unable to determine whether job dissatisfaction led to, or resulted from, poor mental health. It is likely that some sex workers experience psychological distress as a direct result of the nature of their work, including exposure to workplace violence. Also, many street-based sex workers, in addition to being highly likely to experience workplace violence, may be psychologically distressed before entering the industry. Thus, this group may never achieve much job satisfaction. Surprisingly, for the sex workers in the study, workplace experiences did not predict job satisfaction.

In our study, job satisfaction was also related to the initial reason(s) women gave for entering the sex industry. Sex workers who entered the industry because of high earning potential and flexible hours reported high job satisfaction. Some women perceive sex work as a business activity that gives them a financial control of their lives that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Indeed, Perkins and Lovejoy (1996) found that sex workers (most often call girls) who had strong desires to control their working environments and improve their financial situations were healthier and happier than other workers.

This study also found that women who entered the sex industry to support a drug habit reported low job satisfaction. Many of these women probably lack other employment options because of background social disadvantage; many may have left home early, and for negative reasons such as poverty, family dysfunction, child abuse or neglect (Dalla, 2000). Several



authors have suggested that sex workers who use illicit drugs are increasingly likely to be viewed by other sex workers as ‘amateurs’ supporting a drug habit, rather than as business entrepreneurs (Baker, Wilson, & Winebarger, 2004; Potterat et al., 1998; Sterk, 2000).

Women’s drug use may also reduce the power and influence they are able to exert over their workplace (Rose, 2003).

Most surprisingly, exposure to workplace violence was not negatively correlated with job satisfaction. These results are contrary to those of Vanwesenbeeck (2005), who reported that depersonalisation was associated with violent experiences and lack of control in client interactions. Cwikel, Elan and Chudakov (2003) also found that symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder were correlated with workplace trauma. A possible explanation for the finding is that the illegal sex workers (mainly street-workers) who formed the smallest group in the study had the highest incidence of workplace violence (52.4%). As such, the effect of this variable on job satisfaction may have been underestimated in the multivariate analysis.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample may not be representative of all sex workers. While recruitment relied on convenience sampling, the data collection was undertaken by a researcher (CS) whose previous work involved providing treatment services for workers in the sex industry. Her contact with workers from diverse industry sectors provided access to work locations and the knowledge to make direct contact with individual workers. In some respects the recruiter was an ‘insider’ to the industry. This is likely to mean that, for example, workers in legal brothels were disproportionately recruited but that some industry sectors may have been underrepresented. The study did, attempt to address the limitations of previous studies that have relied on targeted sampling of more visible sex workers. Diverse sampling methods

were used to recruit sex workers from most sectors of the sex industry, including private sex workers and illegal escorts. Nevertheless, some of the more covert sectors of the sex industry were underrepresented in the final sample, particularly workers in illegal brothels and escort agencies.

In this study, a number of confounding factors were examined to determine the variance in job satisfaction. We found that current work sector and having recently been victimised by a client confounded one another as illegal sex workers were also more likely to report victimisation. Multivariable analysis was used to adjust for this factor.

Self-selection may also have led to cooperative and willing participants being interviewed while limiting information about those most concerned about privacy and confidentiality.

Another limitation is that a cross-sectional survey design limits the capacity to assess cause and effect. Therefore, although the study adds insight into factors that influence job satisfaction in sex workers, the findings are largely descriptive, and we can only speculate on the reasons for the associations. The questionnaire placed relatively light demands on participants' time and goodwill, which may have improved participation. The population under investigation is often transient, with some women repeatedly entering and leaving the sex industry over time.

While the study provides information on some determinants of job satisfaction, including the identification of occupational hazards (e.g. exposure to body fluids, risk of violence), job satisfaction is likely influenced by a number of other factors. Some of these factors may be unique to the sex industry. Further research into sex workers' experience of social stigma and emotional labour would be both interesting and useful. As mentioned above, looking beyond the immediate reasons why women enter the industry to the societal norms that underpin their decisions would help understand this complex situation.

## CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that a complex of interacting factors contributes to job satisfaction in female sex workers in Queensland, Australia. Many sex workers reported *good* to *very good* job satisfaction. Those workers with lower levels of job satisfaction may have pre-existing problems of both substance misuse and low mental health. The most important determinants of job satisfaction were related to reasons for entering the industry, to openness about sex work (that may correlate with family and social support) and to mental health status. Differences in the level of job satisfaction were not directly related to the demographic characteristics of the sex workers, their exposure to workplace violence or trouble with the police, despite very high levels of the latter two factors in illegal workers. These findings do not support the claim that most sex workers are ‘emotionally damaged’ by their choice of profession, although more detailed longitudinal comparisons of workers in the different industry sectors are indicated.

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